



SAGE SENSE

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Testimony Before the Senate Environment and Public Works Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife and Water, Regarding Sage Grouse Conservation

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INTRODUCTION:

Mr. Chairman, Senators, thank you for inviting me to discuss our sage grouse conservation efforts across the western United States. I am Terry Crawforth, Director of Nevada Department of Wildlife. Today, I would like to tell you of what I believe to be the largest volunteer species conservation effort ever undertaken. An effort designed by the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, with association membership composed of the Fish and Wildlife Agencies from the 23 western states and Canadian provinces.

Sage grouse were first identified by Lewis and Clark in 1831 as *Centrocercus urophasianus*. These “spiny-tailed pheasants” have inhabited Western North America for over 11,000 years and are thought to have occupied an area of approximately 500,000 square miles with optimum numbers estimated at 2 million. Currently, sage grouse occupy approximately 258,000 square miles in 11 states and two Canadian provinces with a total population estimate exceeding well over 250,000 adult birds. Sage grouse are a sagebrush obligate and represent over 20 other species of wildlife that require healthy sagebrush ecosystems in order to survive.

BACKGROUND:

The Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies has been engaged in sage grouse conservation since 1954 when it formed a Technical Committee of scientists and managers. The technical committee advised the western directors in 1995 that they were concerned with the decline in numbers and reduction in distribution of sage grouse across their range and recommend that the association begin specific conservation actions. That year, the member states and provinces committed to take the lead in conserving sage grouse in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), entitled, “Conservation of Sage Grouse in North America.” That MOU called for development of science based local area conservation planning efforts. The dimensions of this effort are significant but successful. To date the western states have developed the cooperation and assistance of the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service via a separate MOU; installed an interdisciplinary range-wide planning framework team; achieved several grants to fund the various planning efforts; completed significant research; standardized data collection techniques and increased our data gathering efforts (last year, biologists and volunteers counted over 50,000 males on 2,600 breeding grounds or leks); and in cooperation with the U.S. Geological Survey, published a 600 page status assessment of greater sage grouse and sagebrush habitats. In this report, our team evaluated the best science available to determine the status of sage grouse and it’s habitat. We

determined that populations declined dramatically from 1965 to the mid-1980s, declined at a slower rate from the mid-1980s and were nearly stable for the past 10-years. While a wide variety of threats to sage grouse were identified in the assessment, the most significant are the degradation, fragmentation and outright loss of western sagebrush habitat.

CONSERVATION EFFORTS

All of the information and science was developed in order to support our most important achievement – grass roots conservation plans. The western states, in cooperation with communities, Native Americans, industry, NGO's, and the various federal agencies have been developing local area and state by state conservation plans. These local working groups currently number more than 50 in 10 states and will number more than 75 groups by 2006. These planning efforts are coordinated by each state and are nationally coordinated by the National Sage Grouse Conservation Planning Framework Team which has members from the association, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The leadership of Nevada Governor Kenny Guinn has led the Western Governor's Association (WGA) to adopt three resolutions supporting this approach to conservation planning and implementation. On-the-ground conservation actions are being implemented across the range, where funding is available and cooperative projects are identified. The WGA has highlighted numerous sage grouse planning and project success stories in their Endangered Species Act listing submission to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. We sincerely appreciate the Governors' support and would like to acknowledge the attention that Bureau of Land Management Director Kathleen Clarke has applied toward sage grouse conservation. Our sage grouse conservation actions are designed to evaluate conservation challenges and implement treatments to address these challenges, monitor the results of the treatment and adapt future management based upon those results.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, we have learned from previous species conservation efforts and succeeded in the largest mobilization ever of the public in a conservation effort. Much of that success can be attributed to the fact that local groups were allowed to develop local solutions without the encumbrance of rules and processes such as those required by the Endangered Species Act. Clearly, this effort will benefit sage grouse and all other wildlife species that use or depend upon sagebrush habitats. We are finished with the first phase of the planning cycle and are beginning project implementation. Successful implementation of meaningful conservation will require years of coordinated effort and a substantial infusion of new money to match existing federal programs such as Farm Bill, fire and fuels management, invasive species, and even the wild horse program. Federal agencies that manage 70 percent of the world's sage grouse habitat, primarily the Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service, do not have the resources to reallocate funds from existing programs to the sage grouse/sagebrush ecosystem conservation efforts. State wildlife agencies and local government are similarly strapped for funds and personnel to conduct planning, implementation, and monitoring efforts. The range-wide effort to conserve sagebrush, sage grouse and associated species, using an incentive based, publicly driven process is an historic new model for conserving a species or ecosystem before it needs protection by the ESA. Local folks are best qualified to address these issues and are more than willing to step up to the plate. What they need is financial support in order to implement planned projects, and if I might be so bold as to suggest that this might come in the form of increased State Wildlife Grants or even a separate federally funded sage grouse/sagebrush conservation initiative.

Thank you and I would gladly answer any questions.



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